

Sermon Study of a Reformation Text: John 8:31-36

by Raymond E. Ziebell

[Southeastern Wisconsin District Pastoral Conference, September 11, 1984]

The overall theme of the sermon text before us seems to me to boil down to the concept of freedom or liberty. This concept of liberty or freedom is one of the great characteristics of the Kingdom of God -- it is a free kingdom and it makes free all who enter it. Liberty has always been a characteristic that all people desire to possess, and those who have it even boast of it. We can well imagine the prideful Jews puffing up their chests as they boasted to Jesus that they were the descendants of Abraham and had never been slaves of anyone. We in America can also readily pride ourselves in our great political liberty which we enjoy in this great land of ours. Even as Lutheran Christians we could easily boast of the religious liberty we enjoy as "Children of the Reformation." Nonetheless, even though through faith we are truly spiritual descendants of Abraham and heirs of God with him, even though we are American citizens who enjoy the benefits of civil liberty, even though we are people who enjoy the blessings of our Lutheran heritage, we dare not boast in anything except what the Apostle Paul boasted in when he said, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Galatians 6:14).

"To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free'" (vs. 31-32 NIV).

The imperfect *ellogon* is descriptive here and means that Jesus was adding the following to what he had already spoken. The purpose was to root out any false sense of boasting on the part of those Jews, whom we are told, *pepisteukotav* "had believed him." These believers are the ones mentioned in verse 30 who just came to faith in Jesus "even as he spoke." Jesus did not want to leave their faith in its infancy lest it fade and they lose it. These young believers must advance to such a stage of faith that it can be said of them, "you are really my disciples." This does not mean that they are in no way his disciples now, for every believer, no matter how small his faith, is Jesus' disciple. The term *marthw* signifies a learner, but in relation to Jesus, a learner attached to him in faith and thus receiving his instruction.

The conditional clause is a present general (*eōh* with the subjunctive in the protasis and present indicative in the apodosis) and expresses continued or repeated action in the present time. Both the word *αληθως* (truly or really) and the conditional clause *eōh* indicates the uncertainty as to whether or not these new and weak beginners in believing will continue in the faith and be truly disciples by allowing their faith to develop into a strong and enduring faith. To this thought Luther says,

It is a disappointing price that Christ asks of those who were beginning to believe in Him and were saying: "We will remain loyal to You even at the risk of life and limb." Christ looks askance at them and says: "Yes indeed, if your faith in Me were only genuine and sincere! But it seems to Me that you will not remain faithful to Me." And now Christ begins to speak about the true and the false disciples of the divine Word: "Many hear the Gospel and remain with it for utilitarian reasons. They reap money, goods, and honor from it. My dear friends, who would not like that! For this reason I state: 'If you continue in My Word and doctrine, you are truly My disciples.'" For I have two types of disciples. The one group believes in Me; they praise and hear the Gospel and say: "This is the real truth." I regard them as great and fine Christians. It is all a matter of continuing. Then there are others who hear it; but when the battle grows hot, they declare: "Upon my soul, should I forsake this or that for the sake of the Gospel?" There are few who remain true to the Gospel in the face of cross and persecution. Where can one find those who are constant? Therefore I say that if you continue in My Word, you are truly My disciples. If My doctrine pleases you, you are well schooled and know everything. And if you persevere in

the doctrine through cross and suffering, then you are My disciples. But My doctrine demands more than just an initial acceptance and much praise. I know that it is easy to believe in the beginning. But where are those who remain steadfast, who persevere, endure, and say: "Let come whatever God sends me! If I am not to be well, then I am satisfied to be sick. If I am not to be rich, then I shall be content to remain poor. Whether I live or die, I shall remain with Christ?" People would gladly believe in Christ if this could make them lords or confer kingdoms on them. But if it involves suffering, they will have no part of it, and faith is finished. Therefore Christ declares: "I am sure that you will not adhere to My doctrine." Fidelity to Christ's doctrine is rare, especially when people encounter an evil wind. To be sure, many become Christians and hold firmly to the Gospel at first; but then they abandon it, like these fellows in our text. This is reflected by the parable in the Gospel about the seed that fell on a rock. When the sun beat down upon it, it withered away (Luke 8:6). But those who stick to the Gospel are the true disciples. The others are false Christians and false brethren. (*Luther's Works*, Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 6-8, pp. 392-3)

Luther here rightly associates the *logos* (word) with none other than the doctrine of the Gospel. It is the Gospel which is the truth of Scripture, that power of God which makes us and all people free. That little word "if" presupposes the possibility of a person continuing or not continuing in the Word, continuing to know and believe the truth of the Gospel, continuing to be free or becoming again a slave to sin.

We might have expected Jesus to say, "Then you will believe the truth." But instead he says, "Then you will know the truth." It goes without saying that as adults we receive the Gospel through our minds. The mind is the gateway by which the truth of the Gospel touches our hearts. The mind or our reasoning abilities and will, however, do not have the power to create and sustain faith, that is purely the work of the Holy Ghost working in and through the Word which we abide, hold to, or remain in. Our Augsburg Confession in Article XVIII speaks of our reason and will in this way, "it has no power, without the Holy Ghost, to work the righteousness of God, that is, spiritual righteousness; since the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, I Cor. 2:14; but this righteousness is wrought in the heart when the Holy Ghost is received through the Word."

The effect and work of the Holy Ghost through the Word, the truth of the Gospel, will be, "and the truth will set you free." It will set us free from the shackles of sin and the bondage of Satan, for when the Gospel of pardon in Jesus' atoning blood becomes ours through faith it removes sin and the guilt of our sin completely. It justifies us before God. The truth with its regenerating and renewing power also delivers us from the clutch of Satan's power and gives us a new heart and a new life which is able to love God, to fear and trust in Him and to do His will, not indeed perfectly in this life, yet with increasing desire and strength.

"They answered him, 'We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?'" (v. 33 NIV) The ancestral nature of being a Jew by birth was exceedingly strong in those who answered Jesus. They still clung to the idea that spiritually they were free because they were Jews. These people before Jesus had to be freed from this damning idea. They had to be turned away from self-righteous national pride to the Son alone who could set them free. This is why Jesus answered them, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever" (vs. 34-35-NIV).

Following these verses Luther states,

These words offend and inflame them anew. They feel insulted by His statement that they are to be set free by His doctrine and by the truth, as though they were captives and slaves. They say: "We are not bondsmen; we are free, for we are Abraham's seed. And Abraham's seed has the promise of God to be the head, yes, not the tail but the head (Deut. 28:13), which is to soar above in the world and not cower on the ground." Thus Rebecca had been told (Gen. 25:23): "The elder shall serve the younger," These words they understood and took to heart, interpreting them to mean that the whole world should be nothing compared with them, and that the whole world

should serve them. Therefore even when the prophets warned them: “You will be led into captivity by the Babylonians and the Assyrians; wait and see” -- they did not believe, but called the prophets heretics. They lived and did as they chose, and the prophets had to hear them say: “We are the seed of Abraham.” Thus here they also rub this under Christ's nose and say: “You may claim to be able to do this, but You might as well cross out Your words. To be Abraham's seed involves blessing, kingdom, government, and inheritance. We shall reign and rule. And now You come along as a heretic who joins the false prophets in disputing the reality of our freedom. You are causing many to fall prey to this heresy when You deny that we are Abraham's seed and imply that the promise given to Abraham does not pertain to us.” They alone want to emphasize that they are free men. And since Christ will not proclaim this, they soon take offense at Him -- especially the mighty among them -- and fall away, although they had believed in Him before. (*Luther's Works, Sermon on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 6-8, p. 397*)

If a person takes offense, as Luther indicates the mighty among them undoubtedly did, and falls away from Jesus and turns away from the truth of the Gospel, that person commits sin and is no longer free. In fact, if a person (present active participle nom, sg. ποίῳῃ denoting continued action) keeps on doing sin (ἀμαρτία) by continuing to miss the mark of the teaching and truth of Jesus, that person is a slave to sin. He is not a faithful disciple of the truth, but is rather a servant of sin and a disciple of the devil. Such a person has no permanent place in the family of believers. Outwardly for awhile he may enjoy - but not forever. When a person commits sin and lives in unrepentance and unbelief, heaven's door is closed to that person, he will lose out on the eternal blessings of the family of God. There is only one escape from such a state and that is through the great liberator Jesus Christ who reaffirms this blessed fact, "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (v. 36 NIV).

This statement, though not the conclusion of his discourse with the Jews, forms a climax to which the previous statements are meant to lead. The word concerning the slavery of sin, and that concerning the sad position of the slave, might seem to cut off all hope, but this is not so. Jesus very skillfully lets the light of hope shine forth again. He goes back to his first thought concerning his true disciples who will be set free. He even masterfully uses again the word for freedom (ἐλευθερίῳ) which he had used, and the word free (ἐλευθεροί) which the Jews had used in their reply to him. He does this in a future more vivid conditional clause (εἴ with the subjunctive in the protasis and future indicative in the apodosis) which indicates the vivid action of being made free by him who is freedom personified. When Christ Jesus sets the sinner free, he is free indeed. He is free as an adopted son who is made one of the family or household of God. This freedom the Psalmist speaks of, "One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple" (Ps. 27:4 NIV). This freedom he further knows is not just for this life only, but for that life which is to come when he says, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (Ps. 23:6b NIV).

In conclusion to this sermon study, I would like to let Luther have the last word when he says,

This doctrine proves its worth when death approaches, when the devil speaks to you and says: “You are forsaken by God, you are steeped in sin.” It is also invaluable when your conscience denounces you. At such a time it is not a doctrine composed of mere letters and words, but a living doctrine, one that does not tell you what to do and what to say, but how to live, how to defend and preserve your life against death, and how to escape the jaws of the devil. In such an hour, words and boasting are futile and vain. Such is the consistent trend of John the Evangelist. He cannot treat of this theme enough; he cannot preach too often that all depends on Christ, through whom we have everything. He knows well that many will say: “Lord, Lord” (Matt. 7:21), and that those who want to become free from sin through the Son are few. This freedom is attained when I have faith in Christ and believe that He suffered and died for me. This is what liberates me from sin - not I myself, fasting, the life of a monk or nun, the Mass, pilgrimage, or the intercession of Mary or other saints; but it is solely Christ's redemptive work...This is a sublime sermon. The Holy Spirit presents and submits it to the children and to the simpleminded. Old fools like me learn this with great difficulty. Little children learn it best.

Others learn this wisdom too well, assuming that when they have heard it once, they know it all. I, however, feel that I cannot understand it. St. Paul has the same complaint, saying that he would like to believe and accept this as the Word of God, but that in his flesh there is someone who wars against it and will not accept it (Rom. 7:18-19). Therefore the central fact of this freedom must be proclaimed daily. Then the other freedom will surely follow. But if you want to begin with, and treat of, physical freedom, you will become so muddled and confused that you will lose both freedoms. You must bear this in mind. "Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." Both hell and death are his masters. He cannot escape them. How, then, can I become free? Men answer: "I will erect a chapel, endow an eternal Mass, go on pilgrimages, fast, become a monk, etc." But Christ says, "That is just the right way! No, let Him who is called the Son of God deliver you from sin; then you are free. If you give yourself to Him and let Him set you free, all is well. Otherwise everything will be vain and futile, no matter what else you do." (*Luther's Works*, Sermon on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 6-8, p. 411)

Sermon Outline on John 8:31-36

Introduction:

The concept of liberty or freedom is one of the great characteristics of the Kingdom of God -- it is a free kingdom and it makes free all who enter it. Liberty has always been a characteristic that all people desire to possess, and those who have it even boast of it. We can well imagine the prideful Jews puffing up their chests as they boasted to Jesus that they were the descendants of Abraham and had never been slaves of anyone. We in America can also readily pride ourselves in our great political liberty which we enjoy in this great land of ours. Even as Lutheran Christians we could easily boast of the religious liberty we enjoy as "Children of the Reformation." Nonetheless, even though through faith we are truly spiritual descendants of Abraham and heirs of God with him, even though we are American citizens who enjoy the benefits of civil liberty, even though we are people who enjoy the blessings of our Lutheran heritage, we dare not boast in anything except what the Apostle Paul boasted in when he said, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Galatians 6:14). This morning, on the basis of our text, we would like to ask ourselves as Lutherans,

Theme:

"A Reformation Question – Do you want to be Free?"

- I. Fulfill the one condition 31-33
 - A. Continue in His Word
 1. The purpose of the condition
 - a. To strengthen faith 31
 - b. To lead to the truth 32
 2. The Jews considered themselves to be disciples (learners and followers) of the Word
 - a. Disciples who continued in God's Word
 - b. Disciples who were free by nationality
 3. The condition presupposes different possibilities.
 - a. To continue in God's Word
 - b. Not to continue in God's Word
 - B. Know what is the truth
 1. Reason asks as
 - a. Pilate, "What is truth?"
 - b. Luther, "Who am I, that I should lift up mine eyes or raise my hands to the divine Majesty?" (ques. thought at First Mass. cf. *Here I Stand* by Bainton pp. 39-44)

- c. Luther's sinfulness and the lack of the knowledge of the truth always bothered him from youth on until the knowledge of the truth touched his heart.
- 2. Listen to the truth
 - a. Hear the voice of Jesus John 18:37
 - b. God's Word is truth John 17:17
 - 1.) All God's Word is the truth
 - 2.) Not the Law for freedom
 - 3.) Gospel for freedom and power
- 3. Receive the truth of the Gospel
 - a. Through knowing the truth
 - b. Through believing the truth
 - c. By the work of the Holy Ghost (Augsburg Confession Art. XVIII)

Application:

Thank God Luther's heart was touched with the Gospel. He received by God's grace, the freedom which he so longed for most of his life. Most of us, if not all of us, did not and do not have to struggle over our sins in the same way Luther did over his sins. Nonetheless, we should not and dare not take the gift of our faith for granted. We are not to become smug as children of the Reformation and boast, "We are Luther's descendants and have never been slaves. We have always been free." Such boasting without the spiritual substance of fulfilling the one condition of really continuing in God's Word, and knowing what is the truth which makes us free through faith, is the same as pride which goes before the fall. Scripture says, "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18 NIV).

Transition:

Nothing can prevent us from continuing in and knowing what the truth of God's Word is and receiving the freedom of this truth except for the hindrances to freedom by committing sin, by becoming the servants to sin, and by not knowing, trusting, and following the one liberator from sin. Therefore, we will want, as we see secondly, to

- II. Follow the one liberator 34-36
 - A. Fear the hindrances to freedom
 - 1. By committing sin
 - a. Jews had to be told what they were to be freed from (Sermon Study pp. 4-5 – *Luther's Works* p. 397)
 - b. Whoever commits sin is not free
 - 2. By becoming servants of sin 34
 - a. Keep on doing sin (ποιωϋ)
 - 1.) Slave to sin
 - 2.) Servants of Satan
 - b. Using the Gospel for utilitarian reasons (Sermon Study pp. 2-3 – *Luther's Works* pp. 392-3)
 - 3. By having no permanent place in the family 35
 - a. May enjoy for awhile on earth
 - b. Will not enjoy forever in heaven
 - B. Trust Christ the liberator 36
 - 1. He has the right to free
 - a. He earned it - through the Cross

- b. He gives it - through the gift of forgiveness
- 2. We receive Christ the liberator through faith
 - a. By nature – dead
 - b. By faith - alive

Application:

The liberator Jesus Christ inspires our faith through the truth of the Gospel as He did Martin Luther.

- 1. We have the assurance and comfort as did Luther
 - a. In knowing that his blood avails for me
 - "He breaks the power of canceled sin,
 - He sets the prisoner free;
 - His blood can make the foulest clean;
 - His blood avails for me" (T.L.H. 360:4).
 - b. In experiencing the vivid action of being made free (e@h) 36
- 2. We have the great joy as Luther experienced of being made free
 - a. From the penalty of sin
 - b. From the wrath of God
 - c. To serve him now
 - d. To live with him forever in heaven

Conclusion:

This is real freedom, the freedom restored to us by Martin Luther in the Reformation of the Church and preserved for us through our Lutheran heritage. If you want to remain in that freedom; if you want to continue to know the answer to the Reformation question -- "Do you want to be free?"; then by the hallmark of our faith, "by grace alone, by faith alone, by Scripture alone" you will fulfill the one condition by continuing in his Word and knowing what is the truth. You will fear the hindrances to your freedom of committing sin and becoming the servants of sin, and persons who have no permanent place in the family of God. And finally, you will trust and follow the one liberator -- Jesus Christ your Savior. If you do, and I pray that all of us do, then as with Luther and as with all true believers, the Son of God will make you free and you will be free indeed.